

The Bolshevik Campaign against Religion in Soviet Russia: 1917-1932

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by

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Introduction

Upon taking over Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks had an ambitious plan: they wanted to transform the country, destroying the remnants of a capitalistic tsarist order and replacing it with a new government that would rule in the name of the working class. This transformation would require the complete rebuilding of Soviet society, and in order to guarantee its success, the peoples of the Soviet Union would need to learn and master Bolshevik ideology. Included within this Bolshevik ideology was a rejection of religion, which, in the words of Karl Marx, was “the opiate of the masses.” The Bolshevik Party’s enormous task in this area over the following decades would be to bring about this rejection of religion among the Russian people, and with this task, they struggled greatly throughout the 1920’s and early 1930’s.

This thesis will look at the effect that Bolshevik ideology and propaganda had upon the religiosity of the Russian people between the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the end of the First Five-Year Plan in 1932. It will ultimately attempt to determine whether or not Bolshevik antireligious campaigns were able to genuinely spread atheism and eliminate religion, or whether other forces were the primary cause of the decline in religion throughout Russian society.

Three major areas relevant to the decline of religion will be analyzed. After the first chapter provides a background on Russian religiosity and Bolshevik ideology, the second chapter will focus upon the spread of literacy throughout the new Soviet society. Before the Bolsheviks could effectively present atheist ideas, they first had to guarantee that the average person would be able to understand the message. Since the average peasant could not read, the information that they received would be limited; much of the time, they developed an understanding of the world through a village priest. By helping these people become literate, the Bolsheviks hoped to

increase the amount of information available to the average peasant. Ideally, this acquired information would lead to the renunciation of religion.

The third chapter will focus upon the schools as vehicles to stifle religious thought. Given that the youth of any culture is generally more receptive to change, the Bolsheviks attempted to instill communist ideology in the younger generation through the school system. In particular, they attempted to eliminate religious teachings in favor of an emphasis on science and communist ideology. The Bolsheviks wanted to achieve universal education, though the agricultural nature of peasant life made it difficult to ensure that every child attended school. This chapter will focus upon their methods in dealing with this dilemma.

Finally, the fourth chapter will focus upon the larger attempt to eliminate religion from Russian culture in order to form a new, atheistic communist culture. The Bolsheviks hoped to utilize the increasing levels of literacy and education by forming a new culture, replacing religion with science and rationalism. Through agitation, literature, and art, as well as more coercive and violent methods, the Bolsheviks wanted to eliminate the Church as a factor in the new Soviet way of life. This chapter will look at these methods and assess their effectiveness.

Through looking at these three areas, this thesis will conclude that early Bolshevik propaganda's effect upon the Russian population was limited. Even through the end of the New Economic Policy (N.E.P.), there was little genuine decline in religiosity among the Russian population. Statistical indicators for literacy and school attendance indirectly confirm this; if the Bolsheviks could not effectively educate the average person, they likewise would not have been able to influence their religious beliefs. Not until the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 did substantial progress begin. With rapid industrialization and urbanization, the Russian people became increasingly concentrated within the cities. Rural Russia experienced the effects

of the First Five-Year Plan through collectivization, which combined small, privately owned farms into larger communal properties. These dramatic changes in the organization of Russian society and the traditional Russian way of life were the ultimate causes of the decline of religion in early Stalinist Russia.

The primary sources used throughout this thesis will be limited to works either originally available in English or translated from Russian. Most prominently used are *Red Bread* by Maurice Hindus, a former Russian peasant living in America who returned to rural Russia on the eve of collectivization, and V.I. Lenin's *Collected Works*, which help reveal the logic behind this massive campaign against religion.

There is a small but significant body of relevant scholarly literature, some of which this thesis will draw upon. Among these secondary sources is *Storming the Heavens* by Daniel Peris, which focuses upon the Soviet League of the Militant Godless, an antireligious organization that attempted to spread atheism throughout Russia in the 1920's and 1930's. *The Birth of the Propaganda State* by Peter Kenez describes the many different methods of Soviet propaganda throughout the first thirteen years of communist rule. *Godless Communists* by William Husband describes the Bolshevik attack against religion through 1932 and assesses its success. This thesis will aim to expand on these works by evaluating the successes and failures of the campaign against religion during the first fifteen years of communist rule.

Chapter 1

The Bolshevik Revolution: Communist Ideology Meets Russian Culture

Throughout the early years of the twentieth century, Russia was overwhelmingly rural. Only about eighteen percent of the entire Russian population is estimated to have lived in towns, and most of these were not large cities such as Moscow, but instead, rather small towns.¹ Of the remaining eighty-two percent, most were poor and uneducated, and many of these people had few ties with the cities.² The great majority of these Russian peasants were devoutly religious, having inherited centuries of pagan tradition mixed with Christian tradition, from which they derived their religious practice.

By 1917, Christianity had a long history throughout Russia, existing as a major religion in the area for the greater part of a millennium. The origins of Christianity in Russia can be traced to the conversion of Kiev in 988, during which all of the Kievens were baptized. Yet because this conversion originated from above, at the orders of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, paganism continued to be prevalent for many centuries thereafter.³ Though the people had become nominally Christian, paganism had deep roots that mass baptism did little to eliminate. Even with the spread of Christianity over the following centuries, it did not necessarily become the predominant religion. What the peasants practiced up through the Bolshevik Revolution was more of a mix of Christianity and paganism than any pure religion. This mix of pagan and Christian practice in Russia has been labeled *dvoeverie*, meaning “double faith”.⁴ Though peasants may have professed to be Russian Orthodox believers, their actual practice suggests that

¹ Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 210.

² Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, 210-11.

³ William Husband, *Godless Communists: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2000), 15.

⁴ Pierre Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People*, (London: Mowbrays, 1976), 8.

many other elements existed within their religion, some which could have easily been called heretical in nature by the Church.

Because pagan rituals were so heavily entrenched within peasant religious practice, the Russian Orthodox Church often found it easier to compromise with the practice rather than labeling it as heresy. In order to increase the number of religious marriages without alienating the population, the Church allowed for the continuation of many pagan customs, such one involving the groom's drinking of water from the bride's prenuptial bath.⁵ The Church allowed for certain saints to replace gods to which the peasants would pray; for example, a god of rain would be replaced by a saint to whom the peasants would pray for rain.⁶ The peasants themselves were largely unconcerned with Orthodox religious teachings, instead taking their religious practice from experience and from daily life. Pierre Pascal takes note of a priest who said in 1857 that two-thirds of peasants knew next to nothing about Orthodoxy, and scarcely ten percent of them had memorized the Russian Orthodox creed.⁷ Yet despite this lack of emphasis upon religious doctrine, religious faith was inseparably intertwined with everyday life. They used religion to explain practically every event in their daily lives.

Peasants viewed farming as an endeavor requiring God, since they believed God to be directly responsible for sunshine, rain, and a good harvest, among other things. In order to ensure these, peasants would repeatedly pray to their respective saints. Birth and death likewise required intense prayer and religious ritual. A ritual such as baptism of a newborn is inherently religious in nature, and their beliefs would make it difficult for peasants to abandon a practice that they believed to be necessary for the child's salvation.

⁵ Husband, *Godless Communists*, 22.

⁶ Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, 61.

⁷ Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People*, 13.

Though the Bolsheviks realized that religion played an important role in most people's lives, they lacked any organized plan to combat religious belief. According to Daniel Peris, "Marx and Engels offered critiques of religion, not a plan to combat religion in the postrevolutionary order. Indeed, they expected the masses to be well alienated from religion by the time the Revolution came, and they dismissed the promotion of atheism as a sideshow to the main conflicts between the working class and the bourgeoisie."⁸ The ideal socialist state would contain a proletariat already disenchanted by religion and capitalism, yet the peasants of Russia could scarcely have imagined life without religion, and the average peasant would have had no notion of capitalism as an economic system.

Communist ideology proved to be irreligious from the beginning. According to Lenin, "Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organization, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class."⁹ This hostility toward religion would consistently manifest itself throughout the early years of Bolshevik reign in confiscations of church property, destructions of churches, and executions of clergymen.

Though the Bolsheviks possessed a definite distaste for religion, an antireligious campaign was not their primary concern upon taking over. The discrediting of religion was only important in the sense that it furthered the goal of building a strong socialist society. Lenin himself seemed far more interested in educating the people so that they would abandon religion on their own terms than fighting a war against religion. He said that, "Engels insisted that the workers' party should have the ability to work patiently at the task of organizing and educating the proletariat, which would lead to the dying out of religion, and not to throw itself into the

⁸ Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998), 21.

⁹ V.I. Lenin, "The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion," *Lenin Collected Works Vol. 15*, (Moscow: Progress, 1973), 402-13, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/may/13.htm>

gamble of a political war on religion.”¹⁰ Many Bolsheviks were convinced that, through education, the worker and the peasant would willingly renounce their religion, in the process adopting and embracing atheism and communist ideology.

In addition to the construction of a new communist society, the Bolsheviks wanted to promote change within the individual. This New Soviet Person would liberate himself from bourgeois influences and become an ardent supporter of Communism, productively aiding in the construction of the new communist society. As a part of this transformation, the New Soviet Person would abandon ancient superstitions. Since the Bolsheviks viewed religion as superstition, the New Soviet Person would also abandon religious belief and practice. He would then base understanding of the world upon rational scientific principles.

But why did the Bolsheviks generally disapprove of religious practice so strongly, and why was the abandonment of religion so critical for this New Soviet Person? Communist ideology suggests that religion is supported by the bourgeoisie in order to subdue the proletariat. Lenin says that, “Those who live by the labor of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven.”¹¹ Though this exploitation would not be consistent with an ideology that valued equality of wealth, there were also practical concerns that resulted in a general opposition to religion.

One such concern was that religion harmed productivity. One complaint that the Bolsheviks had about the Russian peasantry was that the church calendar provided for too many days of rest. With Sundays as days of rest, and celebration of saints’ days in which the population could overindulge in alcohol, the Bolsheviks felt that the peasants’ religion greatly

¹⁰ Lenin, “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion,” 402-13.

¹¹ V.I. Lenin, “Socialism and Religion,” *Lenin Collected Works Vol. 10*, (Moscow: Progress, 1965), 83-87, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/dec/03.htm>.

decreased their productivity. Not including Sundays, Russians abstained from work on approximately 50 holidays each year.¹² Hangovers following these holidays decreased productivity even more. The holidays had a similarly negative effect upon the schools; with children already unlikely to receive a substantial education, these religious holidays further cut into the school year.

Religious holidays were only one small part of a greater problem that religion posed for a new communist society. To the Bolsheviks, religion was essentially a plague in that it prevented people from realizing their full potential in the construction of a communist society. The Central Committee felt that, when a man believes only in himself rather than in a higher power, he will have more strength to place into the building of society.¹³ By believing in God, man takes away from himself the agency to build a better self and a better society. The influential position of village priests exacerbated this problem. The village priest occupied a position of power and influence, guaranteeing that the peasants would value his word. Because the peasants would look to him for daily advice in all areas of life, the priest would have considerable opportunities to criticize Bolshevik ideology.

But this emphasis on atheism should not suggest that the Bolsheviks approved of immorality. Though they may have been atheistic, they believed in a certain code of living that included abstaining from alcohol. Because of this, the Bolsheviks disapproved of drunkenness within the peasantry, and much of this drunkenness occurred during religious celebration. This added yet another reason for the Bolsheviks to disapprove of religion. Unlike in the West, in which Christianity views drunkenness as immoral, alcohol and religion were inseparable in

¹² Husband, *Godless Communists*, 88.

¹³ Central Committee, RKP, “On Anti-Religious Agitation and Propaganda among Women Workers and Peasants,” *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William G. Rosenberg, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 203.

Russia. Drinking was integral to religious celebration, and drunkenness during these celebrations was common. The code of living by which the Bolsheviks believed good communists should live could scarcely be called a “moral” code, however. In a speech in 1922, Bukharin notes that he dislikes the traditional notion of morality, instead arguing that people should adopt norms to aid in the construction of socialist society. As a result, anything destructive to the effort of building a socialist society should be avoided.¹⁴

This conflict between the Communist ideal and the Russian reality would set the stage for decades of antireligious work. Ideally, the Bolsheviks would be able to translate the peasant devotion toward God into an equally fervent devotion toward communism, such as a girl in Maurice Hindus’s *Red Bread* demonstrated: “If need arose she would shoulder a gun and wield a bayonet and kill or be killed in the same high spirit of martyrdom and exaltation with which men in an earlier age killed and died, not for their country, not even for their homes, but for their God.”¹⁵ Maurice Hindus was a Russian peasant who returned to rural Russia after living in America for several years. *Red Bread* chronicles his trip back to Russia in 1929, the eve of collectivization. It is an important source, describing in detail the effects of collectivization on individual peasants as well as the peasant way of life. The decline of peasant religiosity is a prominent theme that continues throughout the book, suggesting that Bolshevik methods were substantially influencing religious belief. As Hindus described in this passage in *Red Bread*, some had already been dramatically influenced by communist ideology. Bolshevik efforts over the following decade would be to spread this enthusiasm, replacing the peasant’s zeal with religion with a new type of zeal, one that would be directed toward the cause of the workers and the building of a new communist state. The next three chapters will aim to determine if the

¹⁴ Bukharin, N., “Bringing up the Young Generation,” *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William G. Rosenberg, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 56.

¹⁵ Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 319.

Bolsheviks were able to eliminate this enthusiasm for religion and replace it with an enthusiasm for communism.

Chapter 2

Universal Literacy: The First Step to an Atheistic Society

In 1917, the Russian people, particularly those in the peasantry, were mostly illiterate. For the Bolsheviks, literacy was necessary for the formation of an ideal communist state. The New Soviet Person would be educated and rational, appreciative of science and technology. As a part of this rationalism, the New Soviet Person would need to accept atheism: he would have to reject religion and superstitious, traditional peasant customs. In order to facilitate this rejection of religion, the Bolsheviks stressed the importance of education. Literacy training was one of the key elements of this education. Without literacy, the Bolsheviks felt that the average person would not be able to overcome centuries of religious superstition in order to compel acceptance of communist ideology. The spread of literacy would allow for the development of a new proletarian culture within Russia: “To achieve greater success in political and economic struggle, the proletariat must develop its own culture, its own proletarian world attitude, which would give greater ideological independence to all forms of proletarian struggle.”¹⁶ Because of this, the drive for universal literacy became a major early goal of the Bolshevik regime, through which they could cultivate a communist class consciousness, discredit religion, promote science, and begin the construction of an ideal communist state. Despite this emphasis placed upon universal literacy, however, most of the Bolshevik plans regarding spread of literacy in the first decade of communist rule ended up being only rhetoric with little action.

The Soviet position on literacy is articulated by Anatoli Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment from 1917 to 1929: “Literacy is a key. And you have given a man nothing if you have given him only a key but not the chest or treasure-box it will open, and similarly, literacy is not a value in itself although without it other values are almost

¹⁶ P.I. Lebedev-Polyansky, “Revolution and the Cultural Tasks of the Proletariat,” *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William G. Rosenberg, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 62.

unattainable.”¹⁷ The metaphor here describes communist ideology and class consciousness as the treasure box which can be opened through literacy. Along with this communist ideology and class consciousness comes a secular understanding of the world and a renouncement of religion. Though much of this chapter will focus upon the specific task of achieving universal literacy without mention of its implications for religion, one must remember that literacy is not only an end but also a means to an end, that of an educated and unreligious society.

Upon first capturing power, the Bolsheviks began to contrast their own rule with the tsarist rule, saying that the tsarist government did little or nothing to educate the people. A Soviet propaganda pamphlet translated into English, “How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R., begins, “Ignorance and illiteracy, lack of rights and desperate poverty were the lot of the masses in tsarist Russia. The attempts of progressive intellectuals to teach people found no support in the government.”¹⁸ Such criticism toward the tsarist regime attempted to discredit those efforts and praise those of the Bolsheviks, but in reality, the previous government was not wholly ineffective in spreading literacy. In the largest cities especially, significant majorities of the population were literate. Of Petrograd’s population, 76.6 percent was literate in 1910, and 70.0 percent of Moscow was literate in 1912.¹⁹ The peasantry remained relatively uneducated and illiterate, but the government of the tsar experienced some progress.

The Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy Among the Population of the R.S.F.S.R., which Lenin signed in December of 1919, essentially commanded the illiterate population of Russia to become literate. It aimed to provide for the elimination of illiteracy by allowing for time and space to study literacy. Workers could take two hours off daily in order to study

¹⁷ Anatoli Lunacharsky, “The Tasks of Extra-Mural Education,” *On Education*, trans. Ruth English, (Moscow: Progress, 1981), 67.

¹⁸ M. Zinovyev and A. Pleshakova, *How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.*, (Moscow: Progress), 5.

¹⁹ Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 73.

literacy without losing wages, and certain public and private buildings could be used in order to teach literacy. This decree also allowed for the conscription of literates to teach literacy to the illiterate.²⁰ As an articulation of Bolshevik ideology, it made clear that the spread of literacy would be necessary for the new communist state. More importantly, however, the decree promised little material support from the central government, placing almost the entire burden of universal literacy upon the people.

Rhetoric alone did little to solve the problem of illiteracy. Kenez speculates that, because the Bolsheviks lacked the manpower for proper oversight of this decree, it is likely that little was done to enforce it.²¹ In 1913, only four years before the Bolshevik Revolution, less than 40 percent of those older than eight could read and write.²² People were generally more educated and more literate in urban areas, but neither urban nor rural areas approached anywhere near universal literacy in the 1910s. With the peasantry generally unconcerned with specific Church doctrine, instead relying on a more personal, grassroots belief system, they often had little need for literacy. The events directly following the Bolshevik Revolution then made it even more difficult and unnecessary to acquire literacy. Living in a country impoverished and torn apart by civil war, the populace had far greater concerns than their education. Famine gripped the nation during this period, forcing people to struggle for their survival. Most had little time for education, a luxury generally unessential to peasant life.

Even if the illiterate population had the means and the will to become educated and literate, the Soviet government at first did little to aid them, despite the heavy rhetoric. Ensnared in a brutal Civil War, the government's resources were locked up in attempting to defeat the

²⁰ Zionyev and Pleshakova, *How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.*, 92-93.

²¹ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 57.

²² Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 14.

White Army. Beyond empty rhetoric regarding literacy, the Bolshevik government primarily concerned itself with the success of its war effort, recognizing that the construction of a communist state would be impossible if they were ousted from power after only a few years. The literate populace, one devastated by war and famine, would initially be forced to shoulder the responsibility of educating the illiterate. This doomed the early attempts at spreading literacy.

Statistics focused upon literacy and education during this time period confirm these failures. The Civil War led not only to a decrease in agricultural and industrial production, but also a decrease in means for education. Whereas in 1914/15, several years before the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of communism, there were 77,539 schools for children in grades one through four, by 1924/25, that number had dropped to 67,838. Not until 1926/27 did the number of schools once again surpass the prerevolutionary levels.²³ The number of literacy schools dropped even after the end of the Civil War. For example, in October 1921, 37,163 literacy schools existed, but by April 1923, that number had dropped to 3,649. Kenez suggests that this was the result of need to balance the budget and save money.²⁴

Bolshevik rhetoric often suggested that they would rely upon the goodwill of the average literate citizen in order to eliminate illiteracy. This can explain much of the decline in direct governmental efforts to spread literacy. One document, “Twelve Rules for Workers Spending Holidays in the Countryside,” explicitly charges the literate with participating in the effort in rural areas: “On arrival, find out if there is a branch of the Down with Illiteracy Society, register yourself with it and take a part of its work upon yourself.”²⁵ Public readings were to be set up in the countryside so that peasants could come and hear communist ideology, perhaps with the hope

²³ Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 148.

²⁴ Kenez, *Birth of the Propaganda State*, 146.

²⁵ Zionyyev and Pleshakova, *How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.*, 94.

of sparking the illiterate's desire to become literate.²⁶ Propaganda often suggested that such undertakings regularly occurred and greatly contributed to the spread of literacy. But without any sort of well-established administration to oversee such an effort, little could be done to guarantee that public readings such as these would actually occur. The Bolsheviks placed too much responsibility in the hands of those who cared little for the literacy of the masses, and they overestimated the initiative that the average illiterate would take to acquire literacy.

Eager to claim significant progress where little existed, however, the Bolsheviks depicted Russians as both eager to lend a helping hand to their fellow countryman and also eager to learn. As an example of such propaganda, "How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R." constantly refers to the drive of the Russians to teach and learn literacy. In particular, it glowingly reports on the success of the Young Communist League in educating Russia's population with such exaggerated statements as, "Overcoming the conservatism of certain officials, skepticism, bureaucratism and indifference, the Young Communist League fought for culture and literacy."²⁷ In reality, much of the success of such organizations was exaggerated, and the Young Communist League and the "Down with Illiteracy" Society provided no such exceptions. Exaggerated numbers as evidence of success were generally more important than success itself for these groups.

The "Down with Illiteracy" Society developed as one such way to fight illiteracy throughout the 1920s. According to "How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.," the "Down with Illiteracy" Society was created from the bottom up, and it spread rapidly throughout the country as everyone struggled to combat illiteracy and achieve universal literacy.²⁸ The

²⁶ Kenez, *Birth of the Propaganda State*, 57.

²⁷ Zionyev and Pleshakova, *How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.*, 38-39.

²⁸ Zionyev and Pleshakova, *How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.*, 24-25.

membership supposedly increased from 100,000 in January of 1924 to 1.6 million in 1925.²⁹ In reality, however, the “Down with Illiteracy” Society “grew” in the manner of many other Soviet organizations: numbers were artificially stretched in order to exaggerate progress that scarcely existed.

Not until after the Civil War could the Bolsheviks assemble the necessary resources to confront illiteracy themselves. Even then, however, the Bolshevik administration continued to place most of the responsibility of spreading literacy upon the shoulders of local government or literate individuals rather than lending any sort of real support. For example, the Soviet government spent 2.8 percent of its budget on the spread of literacy in 1924-25, but that number fell to 1.6 percent by 1927-28.³⁰ This decline in spending did not occur because of an increase in literacy, but rather, because the Bolsheviks felt that people should take initiative in acquiring literacy.³¹ This idealism resulted in little success throughout the duration of the N.E.P.

As in other areas of Soviet policy and ideology, the administration attempted to use propaganda to play a significant role in the spread of literacy. Posters throughout the 1920s aimed to show the benefits of reading by declaring that literacy would bring freedom and prosperity.³² Figure A-1 (see Appendix A) is an example of a propaganda poster from 1920. The poster, which says, “The illiterate man is a blind man. Failure and disaster await him,” shows a blindfolded man on the verge of stepping off of a cliff.³³ Only by removing his blindfold of illiteracy will the man be able to save himself from falling off of the cliff and into the void. This suggests that a life of uneducated subjugation under the bourgeoisie is a sort of

²⁹ Ibid., 30.

³⁰ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 160.

³¹ Ibid., 160.

³² Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, (New Haven, Yale UP, 1988), 104-05.

³³ See Figure A1. Image and translation can be found in: Peter Paret, Beth Irwin Lewis, and Paul Paret, *Persuasive Images: Posters of War and Revolution*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 113.

death. In order to live and truly experience life, one must become educated in order to escape from bourgeois manipulation, embrace communism, and renounce religion.

Even by the end of the 1920s, despite great effort, little headway had been made in entirely eliminating illiteracy. Of all citizens, including young children, 22.3 percent were literate in 1897, 31.9 percent in 1920, and 44.5 percent in 1926.³⁴ Women, minorities, and the poorest of peasants were also overwhelmingly illiterate, with the government making less progress among these groups of people.³⁵ As mentioned earlier, spreading literacy in the countryside had always been problematic; even by the late 1920s, up to eighty percent of “poor” peasants were illiterate.³⁶ The problems of educating school age children in rural areas will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but the problems in spreading literacy among adults were similar. Little funding was available for the effort and the number of teachers available for the task was entirely inadequate.

Only with the widespread industrialization of society did the Bolsheviks finally begin to chip away at illiteracy throughout the countryside. With an industrializing society, the number of peasants would shrink as many began to migrate to the city, where the administration could more easily organize literacy classes. The urban population also had a more urgent need of literacy; living in the city, reading was essential to survival, whereas in the countryside, one could make a living off of the land without ever needing to acquire literacy. Education was often necessary for urban jobs, and as a result, classes would be set up in order to train and educate the workers, often allowing them to gain rudimentary knowledge of literacy.

John Scott, an American who travelled to Russia to work for five years in the 1930s, discusses one of these urban schools in *Behind the Urals*. According to Scott, the schools taught

³⁴ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 157.

³⁵ Ibid., 157-59.

³⁶ Ibid., 157.

a variety of subjects, but most of those who entered the Communist University were at first only partially literate.³⁷ Scott's accounts also suggest that the written word achieved almost a sacred status in these schools when he tells of one exchange with a teacher: “Look at the book, Comrade,’ [the teacher] said. ‘It is written in the book.’ It mattered nothing to this man that ‘the book’ would be declared counterrevolutionary next month.”³⁸ In societies that have just begun to become literate, oftentimes the individuals place too much stock in the written word and neglect the need to be critical. Even though what is written on the page may be outdated or false, for these newly literate people, if it is written, it must be true.

Despite the basic Communist principle that everyone should receive the same pay, Scott suggests that perhaps the Soviet administration paid the skilled and educated workers in order to breed within the Russian people the desire to become educated.³⁹ Though these schools did not teach basic literacy, they are probably exemplary of other urban schools that taught literacy at the time. Despite the claims of Soviet propaganda, many needed a concrete incentive in order to make literacy education worthwhile, whether it be better job prospects or a higher salary.

The question remains: what effect did this slow spreading of literacy have on the religiosity of the average Russian? Because of the proliferation of all types of propaganda throughout the 1920s, the literate person would be constantly bombarded by communist ideology in many different forms. The illiterate would be immune to certain types of Bolshevik antireligious efforts; he would be unable to read the newspaper and unable to interpret many of the local posters and written slogans. The literate, on the other hand, would be open to and inundated by the omnipresent communist ideology. With the Church relegated to the fringes of

³⁷ John Scott, *Behind the Urals*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 46.

³⁸ Scott, *Behind the Urals*, 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 48.

society, the literate would only receive one position in the debate over religion, and this could potentially cause him to drift away from his religion.

This is not to say that the spread of literacy necessarily had a profound effect upon Russian religiosity. After practicing certain religious traditions for centuries, most people would be unwilling to give up their former beliefs after only a decade. But literacy would serve to undermine the Church's authority. Because the local priests were often the only ones with access to Church doctrine, they could authoritatively tell the locals what to believe in regards to religion. Though, as mentioned earlier, peasants tended to generate their own style of religion that differed from Church teachings, the local priest remained as a valuable authority figure. In addition to doctrinal and religious concerns, the priest served as an important resource and advisor in all areas of life. By giving the average peasant the ability to read, the Bolsheviks hoped that the average peasant would be able to challenge Church authority by contradicting Church teachings with scientific knowledge, which would hopefully result in the abandonment of their religion. Even more importantly, literacy would open up the world of information for the peasant, allowing him to absorb all sorts of secular information which would ideally cause him to doubt his belief. The world would no longer be exclusively explained through Orthodox teachings or pagan superstitions. Through literacy, scientific rationalism would provide the peasant with viable explanations for worldly phenomena.

Despite Bolshevik efforts to achieve universal literacy throughout the twenties, when they actually did begin to approach universal literacy, it was more a result of industrialization than any dedicated propaganda drive. Not until the eve of World War II did Russia begin to approach universal literacy; in 1939, for example, 89.1 percent of those between the ages of nine

and forty-nine were literate.⁴⁰ Thus, the religiosity of the average Russian would remain largely unaffected until industrialization and urbanization would force the masses to become literate and rely more heavily upon their education. This did not mean that the Bolsheviks gave up on antireligious education for children, however. The mid-to-late 1920's were characterized by repeated attempts to reinvent the school as a vehicle to articulate communist ideology. By transforming children into good communists at an early age, the Bolsheviks would be able to guarantee a strong communist state for decades to come. Much like the drive for universal literacy, however, progress in this area was slow, and at times, nonexistent.

⁴⁰ Zionyyev and Pleshakova, *How Illiteracy Was Wiped Out in the U.S.S.R.*, 88.

Chapter 3

The Schoolhouse: Eliminating Religion at Its Roots

At the beginning of *Red Bread*, Maurice Hindus noted the appearance of a schoolhouse in his village only five years since his last visit, saying, “In all the hundreds of years of its existence, the thousands of men and women who had lived and sweltered and died there had never known a schoolhouse...Here it was suddenly before me, like an apparition thrust up by the earth.”⁴¹ This comment made during a visit in the summer of 1929, on the eve of collectivization, suggests that the Bolshevik administration had made great strides in reaching the peasantry with its educational program. Even by this point, however, after twelve years of communist rule, the Bolsheviks still had much to accomplish in order to reach their educational goals. Not until the onset of collectivization and the transformation brought about by the First Five-Year Plan did substantial progress begin to be made in education.

Upon assuming power, one of the primary Bolshevik goals was mandatory universal education in order to ensure that every child received adequate instruction, not only in traditional subjects such as reading, but in all subjects so that they would develop a general understanding of the world. Lunacharsky argues that, “A man who knows the fundamentals and the conclusions in technology, and medicine, and law, and history, etc., is truly an educated man. He is truly moving towards the ideal of omniscience, but not in such a way that he only skims the surface of everything.”⁴² Many within the Bolshevik administration in the 1920s, including Lunacharsky, hoped to give every Russian child a broad education; this broad education would then give them ability to learn thoroughly any given vocation. It would also give them the tools to be critical of religion.

⁴¹ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 12-13.

⁴² Anatoli Lunacharsky, “What Is Education?” *On Education*, trans. Ruth English, (Moscow: Progress, 1981), 47.

Perhaps most importantly of the subjects, the school would bear the responsibility of educating children in communist ideology. As a necessary ingredient of communist ideology, the children would hopefully begin to appreciate science and technology as substitutes for religion and superstition. By teaching children the fundamentals of science, the Bolsheviks hoped to instill within them the knowledge to begin to doubt their own religion. Through a scientific understanding of the world, they would ideally abandon their peasant superstitions and take a step toward becoming a New Soviet Person. What the Bolsheviks promoted has been called “scientific materialism,” through which they promoted the belief that, “Science and technology amounted to a universal panacea that would swiftly undermine religious beliefs and lead to the creation of a modern and prosperous society.”⁴³ Through teaching of science and promotion of technology, active agitation in order to undermine religion would ideally cease to be necessary. According to William Rosenberg, “‘Freedom’ under socialism meant consciousness and awareness; ignorance was a means of oppression. The institutional goals of Soviet education were thus designed to ‘enlighten’ as well as ‘to educate,’ to integrate a collectivist order.”⁴⁴

Unfortunately for the Bolsheviks, at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, the schoolhouse had long been a place in which the typical Russian child would receive not only a physical but a spiritual education. Religious instruction was a pillar of many schools in early twentieth century Russia, and in schools run by the clergy, religion took precedent over science. Especially among the peasantry, atheistic thought had scarcely penetrated into popular belief. In order to create an entirely atheistic society, the Bolsheviks would not only have to eliminate religious teaching within the schools, but then also replace the religious teaching with communist

⁴³ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 94.

⁴⁴ William Rosenberg, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 22.

ideology and antireligious propaganda. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, however, the Soviet administration struggled with a lack of funding and disagreement among the Party leaders, resulting in an educational system that could not be truly successful at the promotion of atheism until the beginnings of industrialization.

As if the tendency for schools to feature a religious curriculum did not pose enough of a problem, most children received little or no education at all. Because families needed their children to help with working the land, many parents were reluctant to allow them to attend school. That education was often seen as an unnecessary luxury for peasant life exacerbated this problem, resulting in the vast majority of peasant children receiving little to no education. In 1913, the typical boy would only have a seventy percent chance of having more than one year of schooling; the typical girl would only have a forty percent chance.⁴⁵ Even those peasants that did receive an education, however, did not acquire the values necessary for the development of the New Soviet Person. Teachers in pre-Bolshevik Russia were often inadequately trained, and religion was a staple of the school system.

The January 1918 decree, “On the Separation of Church from State and School from Church,” prohibited religious instruction outside of the school and officially proclaimed Russia as secular.⁴⁶ This was only a separation by words, however, since the Bolsheviks had not yet consolidated power and did not have the power to enforce such a separation decree. Yet the rhetoric extended beyond mere separation. The Bolsheviks wanted more than only the elimination of religion from school and government; they wanted to destroy religion among the populace, creating not just an atheist state but an atheist population. This can be seen as early as the Party program of 1919: “Point 13 stated that the Communists needed to go beyond the mere

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), xiii.

⁴⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 25.

separation of Church and State to become a force for liberating the masses from religion.”⁴⁷

These decrees were the precursors to a strategy which would be employed after the Civil War, in which the administration would attempt to spread atheism through the school.

Peter Kenez argues that, “Had the regime’s primary goal been to overcome illiteracy, the best use of scarce resources would have been to educate all children and organize only an auxiliary drive for interested adults.”⁴⁸ Though such a strategy would have saved resources, the administration was also forced to educate adults so that they would be willing to send their children to secular schools. In certain areas with nonreligious schools, parents refused to allow children to attend, and church attendance continued to be high.⁴⁹ Parental cooperation was already sufficiently difficult to ensure with the need for children to work the land. E. Thomas Ewing, an expert on the Soviet school system throughout the 1930’s, argues that this changed gradually, saying that “Parents and children came to accept Soviet schools because they promised some improvement in the lives of individuals and communities.”⁵⁰ Perhaps equally important was the constant threat of deportation; many parents may have went along with the system in order to avoid the permanent loss of land or loss of opportunities for their children. Ensuring the thorough education of females also posed a different set of problems. Women were generally more religious, which required special efforts to turn them away from religion. They generally cared more about certain religious rituals, such as courtship and marriage, two primarily religious traditions.

In order to guarantee the teaching of a nonreligious communist curriculum, the Bolsheviks would need to ensure a sufficient quantity of adequately trained teachers. The

⁴⁷ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 37.

⁴⁸ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 160.

⁴⁹ Husband, *Godless Communists*, 84.

⁵⁰ E. Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 66.

training of new teachers was necessary since many survived from the tsarist regime and continued to support religion. As late as 1929, Lunacharsky speculated that 30 to 40 percent of teachers continued to be religious or sympathetic to religion, an estimate that was probably conservative.⁵¹ Many problems made it difficult to secure the loyalty of teachers in rural areas, however. Without their loyalty, there would be no way in order to guarantee the proper nonreligious instruction within the schools. One such problem was the inadequate pay of teachers. In 1926, Lunacharsky estimated that teachers only received 47 percent of the pay that they had received prior to the Civil War.⁵² Empty promises regarding salaries were commonplace throughout the 1920s, and the burden of actually paying the teachers was placed on the individual regions and towns. Despite the centrality of education in the grand scheme of Bolshevik goals, the burden for all types of enlightenment increasingly came from local governments into the early 1930s. For example, 35.1 percent of funding came from the central government in 1923/24, but only 18.4 percent came from the central government in 1931. The rest of the burden fell upon the local governments.⁵³ Though some of this can be attributed to the effectiveness in some respects of collectivization, much of the decline occurred before the onset of collectivization. Throughout the 1920s, the local governments, much like the national government, scarcely had the resources to fund the impressive drive for universal education.

The effort to discredit religion spread beyond primary and secondary schools; the Bolsheviks also wanted to promote atheistic thought at the university level. Even into the early 1920s, some professors at Moscow University continued to offer courses on religious topics such

⁵¹ Husband, *Godless Communists*, 81.

⁵² Larry Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 48.

⁵³ Ibid., 147.

as religious history.⁵⁴ Lunacharsky said that, “[Soviet power] has...advanced the slogan of creating a new student body at all costs, to capture the institutions of higher learning for proletarians and peasants.”⁵⁵ In this way, the intelligentsia could be taken away from the bourgeoisie and recomposed by the proletarian classes, allowing communist ideology to solidify itself within the context of a new, communist Soviet society.⁵⁶ From 1927/28 to 1931/32, the percentage of students in higher education originating in the working class had increased from 25.4 to 51.4 percent.⁵⁷

The methods of primary education were heatedly debated throughout the years of the N.E.P., and the effectiveness of these methods was consistently doubted. Particularly contested was the complex method, which “focused on an assortment of themes arranged under the rubrics of nature, labor, and society. A topic under study on a particular day would relate to the theme of the week, which, in turn, would correspond to major topics of the month and year.”⁵⁸ Traditional topics, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, were incorporated into these larger themes, so that the students would be learning these critical abilities through application in real life. In this manner, the child would receive a well-rounded education, in the process learning important communist values that would aid the child in becoming the New Soviet Person. Resistance to this plan was heavy.

Whereas teachers were required to incorporate the traditional subjects into these practical themes, many of them continued to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic separately. One study estimated that many schools spent 80 percent or more of class time on instruction in these

⁵⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), 69.

⁵⁵ Anatoli Lunacharsky, “Students and Counter-Revolution,” *Bolshevik Visions*, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 361-62.

⁵⁶ Lunacharsky, “Students and Counter-Revolution,” 355.

⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union*, 188.

⁵⁸ Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 32.

traditional topics without application to the practical complex method themes.⁵⁹ In its current state, the school system of the N.E.P could not guarantee that these methods would be used, and as a result, the curriculum was relatively ineffective.

Much of the eventual success of the improvement in childhood education came with the implementation of collectivization and the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan. Beginning with these policies, Stalin attempted to force dramatic change within the peasantry; this dramatic change had profound effect upon childhood education. Industrialization required highly trained and educated young adults that would be loyal to the party. Collectivization made it possible for resources to be concentrated and ideology to be standardized within a small community. This in turn made it materially easier to retain teachers, and the teachers were more likely to adhere to communist ideology rather than be supporters of the Church.

Throughout the First Five-Year Plan, peasants increasingly began to move from the countryside into the cities, resulting in a massive demographic shift. Peasants who once had no use for literacy found themselves in an urban environment that required literacy for success. The Soviet administration could also set up classes more easily in the cities, not having to worry about competition with planting and harvesting seasons. For example, in Moscow, enrollment in classes for workers nearly quadrupled from 33,600 literate students and 28,700 semiliterate students in 1928/29 to 100,400 literate students and 145,000 semiliterate students in 1930/31.⁶⁰

Statistics demonstrate this enormous success that the administration finally achieved. Though the deportation of kulaks, the more successful of the peasants in rural Russia, had enormous social costs, some have estimated that of the children of kulaks, 90 percent attended

⁵⁹ Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*, 39.

⁶⁰ David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929-1941*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 164.

school during 1931/32.⁶¹ Though it is worth noting that the kulaks were scarcely more prosperous than the average peasant, the administration saw them as subversive. Even if this number is a gross exaggeration, it still suggests that substantial progress had been made if the children of the most persecuted members of society boasted relatively high school attendance rates. Though teacher shortages remained a problem, the number of teachers dramatically increased from 365,056 in 1928/29 to 614,922 in 1932/33.⁶² In 1932, 55% of all teachers had just started teaching within the past five years.⁶³ As new teachers, these people were younger and would have been socialized into the new communist system. As a result, they would be more likely to have abandoned their former religious convictions, with many of them having been trained in the early years of the First Five-Year Plan.

Religious teaching was far easier to control within the cities as well. As a result of the increasing success of the schools, children were increasingly doubting and abandoning their religion. The schools in Moscow, for example, promoted atheism, and there were a sufficient number of them to guarantee that the children could attend. The children who attended these schools often became critical of religion and the Church, including even those whose parents regularly took them to church.⁶⁴ By placing such emphasis on childhood education, the Bolsheviks would hope to eventually have an adult population that had abandoned religious belief and supported atheism.

By the end of the First Five-Year Plan in 1932, 98 percent of children between the ages of eight and eleven were attending school, and the Soviet administration claimed to have

⁶¹ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union*, 163.

⁶² Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism*, 67.

⁶³ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁴ Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis*, 184.

achieved universal education for children of these ages by 1934.⁶⁵ Though primary education would not guarantee the spread of atheism, it would lay the groundwork for the elimination of religion from daily lives. By fostering an understanding of science and technology along with communist ideology, the Bolsheviks hoped that the average peasant would finally see religion as a bourgeois institution created for the subjugation of the proletariat. In reality, however, this did not occur so easily.

After taking over Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks were overwhelmed with problems in educating the peasants of the primarily rural country. Not only did they have to eliminate the teaching of religion in many schools, but they had to ensure that every child actually attended these newly reformed schools. Despite efforts to change curriculum, expand the teaching corps, and ensure that every child attend school, much of the “reform” was only empty rhetoric. Not until the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan, with the widespread industrialization of society and the collectivization of the countryside was it finally possible to ensure control over the curriculum and to ensure that every child attend school.

⁶⁵ Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism*, 61.

Chapter 4

A New Soviet Culture: Atheism in Policy and Art

By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, religion had been entrenched within Russian culture for many centuries. Peasant religion extended beyond merely going to church and praying; belief in God pervaded nearly every aspect of a peasant's life, from farming to marriage to birth and death. According to William Husband, "To the majority in society...the status quo was more a preordained order than an intellectual or even a personal choice, and perpetuating familiar rhythms of life was all but instinctive".⁶⁶ Simply using the schoolhouse in order to teach atheism to the next generation of communists may have been important, but the Bolsheviks needed to confront religion in the culture at large.

This chapter will deal with Bolshevik tactics to discredit religion and spread atheism throughout Russian culture, beyond just their efforts in the schoolhouse. Some of these tactics amounted to violent coercion: Soviet leaders destroyed churches, executed clergymen, and generally terrorized the religious. In addition to increasing production, collectivization helped allow the Bolsheviks to control peasant culture. Labor reforms attempted to eliminate the astounding number of religious holidays spread throughout the year. Other methods were more benign: art and literature became vehicles through which the communist, and thus, atheistic, ideal could be communicated. The press became critical in reaching the peasantry, though this was contingent upon the success of literacy campaigns. The administration dispatched agitators to the countryside, where they often debated with clergymen over the merits of science and religion. By the end of the N.E.P., the Soviet administration had only limited success in discrediting religion and promoting atheism. Not until the end of the First Five-Year Plan did this cultural shift begin to substantially influence the average Russian.

⁶⁶ Husband, *Godless Communists*, xiii.

Because the Bolsheviks originally had no plan to combat religiosity throughout society, the regime's early efforts were often disorganized and focused upon coercion of individuals and destruction of property rather than education of the population. At the beginning, the Bolsheviks specifically targeted the Russian Orthodox Church rather than individual belief.⁶⁷ In addition to serving as an ideological opponent to the Bolsheviks, the Church aided the White Army from the beginning of the Civil War.⁶⁸ In 1922, in order to fund the Civil War and overcome a destroyed economy, the Bolsheviks began to seize valuables from the Russian Orthodox churches.⁶⁹ One document tells of Lenin requesting that a famine be used to undermine the clergy's authority: "It is precisely now and only now, when in the starving regions people are eating human flesh, and hundreds if not thousands of corpses are littering the roads, that we can (and therefore must) carry out the confiscation of church valuables with the most savage and merciless energy."⁷⁰ Perhaps Lenin felt that support of the Church would be waning as the people starved, and as a result, famine would be the perfect time to attack the Church without massive public disapproval. Yet this confiscation of property served a dual function. The Civil War left Russia in ruin, and with production falling far below pre-Revolution levels, the Communists desperately needed funds. Confiscation of church property allowed them to fulfill this need for funding while at the same time leveling a blow at the Orthodox Church.

These confiscations of Church property sometimes led to rioting, and sometimes to fatal violence, which in turn led to prosecution of the individuals involved. Laity as well as clergymen died in this violence. One example of such a revolt occurred in a small village, Shuia, resulting in imprisonment and execution of both clergymen and laymen. When a crowd of

⁶⁷ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 19.

⁶⁸ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 67.

⁶⁹ Richard Pipes, ed., *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), 150-51.

⁷⁰ Pipes, *The Unknown Lenin*, 152-53.

Christian civilians attempted to protect their local church from being looted, soldiers fired into the crowd, killing several of them. Lenin reportedly requested to be told daily the number of priests that had been executed as a result of this rebellion.⁷¹ Violent episodes such as this serve as examples of the brutal methods with which the Bolsheviks attempted to suppress rival groups early in their rule.

Throughout this period, the Bolsheviks repeatedly closed or destroyed churches in order to discredit the Orthodox Church. Ideally, the Bolsheviks wanted the local populations to request the closure of the local churches, though this rarely occurred in reality.⁷² Churches that escaped destruction often survived to be used by the Bolsheviks for other purposes. For example, a church in Iaroslavl' was ironically transformed into an antireligious museum.⁷³

Forced collectivization, though it primarily aimed to increase agricultural production by eliminating wasted land and allowing for farming with expensive equipment, it also served cultural needs for the Communists. Collectivization simplified the administration's efforts to eliminate the Church's influence upon social life; the Communists generally closed the local church upon the collectivization of a village.⁷⁴ This dramatically decreased the influence that the Church could have in an individual's life by standardizing the peasants' social experience and education. Collectivization was not a mere reorganization of land ownership, but rather a complete destruction and rebuilding of the peasants' social structure. For centuries, the peasants had lived on and worked their own land, but this new social structure imposed from above wreaked havoc on peasant culture, particularly religion.

⁷¹ Ibid., 151.

⁷² Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 10.

⁷³ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 111.

In the realm of labor, there were occasional attempts to implement a continuous workweek. By doing this, the communists attempted to prevent workers from attending church, thus greatly reducing the influence of the Church on everyday life.⁷⁵ In addition to the continuous workweek, the Bolsheviks eliminated the dozens of yearly religious holidays, each of which would result in a day off of work for the peasants. As mentioned in the first chapter, this not only helped to control the drunkenness associated with such holidays, but it also lengthened the work year by several weeks.

Despite the frequent use of force during the first decade of Bolshevik rule, the Bolsheviks ultimately hoped to convince the people to abandon religion through intellectual reason.⁷⁶ Art became a form through which the Communist ideal could be expressed, and atheism became a frequent theme within certain genres of art. One example can be seen in *Cement*, an early example of a Socialist Realist novel by Fyodor Vasilievich Gladkov. Though not explicitly antireligious, many of the characters within *Cement* represent idealized Communists. In the novel, the main character, Gleb, refused to allow a priest into his house upon being informed that he would be a godfather.⁷⁷ Gleb symbolizes the ideal Communist throughout *Cement*, and his disapproval of participation in such a standard ritual as baptism demonstrates that the ideal Communist should also disapprove of such ritual. He is “willing temporarily to compromise [his] ideals in order to start rebuilding the country.”⁷⁸ The ideal Communist would presumably be likely to abandon his previous religious beliefs in order to contribute to the construction of the ideal communist society.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁶ Husband, *Godless Communists*, 70.

⁷⁷ Fyodor Vasilievich Gladkov, *Cement*, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 294.

⁷⁸ Edward Vavra, “Afterword,” in *Cement* by Fyodor Vasilievich Gladkov, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 315.

In a *Pravda* article in 1923, Trotsky placed great importance on film, saying that it “cries out to be used,” and that it can create “a propaganda which is accessible to everyone, which is attractive, which cuts into the memory and may be made into a possible source of revenue.”⁷⁹ Film could be the most practical tool of propagandists, because unlike literature or the press, one did not have to be literate in order to understand a film’s underlying message. Film, as a relatively new technology, would have also had the ability to impress the peasants, holding them captivated while delivering a communist message.

Direct efforts to teach were not limited only to children, with both agitation and press propaganda prevalent in order to influence adults. Communist organizations actively used professional agitators and the press in order to spread and encourage atheistic thought. The largest of such organizations was the League of the Militant Godless, which was created for the explicit purpose of spreading atheism and discouraging religion. The League of the Militant Godless claimed to have five million members at one point, but these figures were exaggerated, as Soviet bureaucrats inflated numbers in order to meet goals and impress superiors.⁸⁰ The numbers were not so much representative of progress as a way to create an illusion of progress.

Nevertheless, the League had many undertakings that aided in the denunciation of religion. Printing of the *Bezbozhnik* (Godless), an atheistic newspaper, began in 1922; 15,000 copies were printed in the first run.⁸¹ Creation of the *Bezbozhnik* allowed for easier recruitment of members to the League. At its peak, the *Bezbozhnik* had a print run of over 500,000 copies.⁸² Yet literature depended both upon the literacy of the masses as well as the ability of propagandists to write articles easily readable by the masses.

⁷⁹ This article is quoted in: Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 219.

⁸⁰ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 8.

⁸¹ Ibid., 43.

⁸² Ibid., 43-44.

Poster art became a popular way to spread propaganda, and it was often used in order to discredit religion, though it served many other purposes as well: “Posters became vehicles for literacy and hygiene campaigns, economic development, political indoctrination, and social change.”⁸³ Figure A-2 (see Appendix A) is a poster from 1931 that shows an old woman pulling a young girl by the hair, dragging her away from a modern building and toward a church. This artwork provides an example of the symbolism present in Soviet poster propaganda at the time. The editor’s caption says, “The old woman struggles against the child’s desire to turn away from the crumbling edifice of the church towards a future in which the cross is replaced by an airplane.”⁸⁴ The church crumbles while the modern building, which is labeled “school,” stands solid and upright. It is notable that the woman is an old and hideous creature, suggesting that the Church is aged and will soon die away. The girl, on the other hand, is young with flowing blonde hair, suggesting that technology and communism are the future. In addition to this, the young girl wears red, the symbolic color of communism. Poster art allowed for the propagation of communist ideology through a format that would not necessarily require a literate people. One could possibly glean messages from a poster without actually being able to read it, making these potentially valuable weapons as the drive toward universal literacy continued.

Perhaps the greatest assets that the Bolsheviks used in order to discredit religion were science and technology. In the attempt to construct a communist superpower out of a backward country, the Bolsheviks adored technology and glorified scientific professions such as engineering.⁸⁵ Many Soviet leaders felt that religion would ultimately disappear as a result of

⁸³ Paret, *Persuasive Images*, 112.

⁸⁴ See Figure A2. This poster and translation can be found in: Ibid., 117.

⁸⁵ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 169.

emerging forms of science, technology, education, and entertainment.⁸⁶ The peasantry often used religion and superstition to explain good fortune and misfortune. Through improvements in science and technology, the Bolsheviks hoped to encroach upon the realm of events explained by the supernatural. By explaining things such as weather, disease, and life and death as results of complex scientific processes, they would attempt to eliminate the role of religion as an explanatory factor in individuals' lives. In response to criticism that elimination of religion took meaning out of peoples' lives, the *Bezbozhnik* responded: "Destroying religion, we say: study science. Science instead of religion. You need to know how nature and human society function. Only in these conditions is it possible to give meaning to your existence."⁸⁷ Replacing religion with science, however, required the Bolsheviks to demonstrate what they believed to be the fallacy inherent in religious thought. Lunacharsky felt that study of natural science, specifically Darwinism, naturally led to Marxist thought.⁸⁸

The manner in which the Bolsheviks attempted to rid Russia of superstitious religious thought was through rationality and scientific inquiry. The *Bezbozhnik* challenged the Church, saying, "We propose submitting holy water to a test. We claim that holy water gets musty and spoils, that the same rotten algae and bacteria...grow in it as grow in water that has not been blessed."⁸⁹ At times, the Bolsheviks would stage debates between educated agitators and priests in order to discredit the Church. Lecturers spoke to crowds, presenting on topics such as human development and creationism in order to contradict the Bible and lead the people to accept science to replace their former beliefs.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 23.

⁸⁷ This article is quoted in: *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁸ Anatoli Lunacharsky, "The Educational Tasks of the Soviet School," *On Education*, trans. Ruth English, (Moscow: Progress, 1981), 256.

⁸⁹ Editors of *Bezbozhnik*, "Calling All Believers," *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William G. Rosenberg, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 205.

⁹⁰ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 184.

Of all Soviet policies, collectivization created the most potential for the spread of antireligious thought. Forced collectivization, though it primarily aimed to increase agricultural production and eliminate rural capitalism, also served cultural needs for the Communists. Collectivization simplified the administration's efforts to eliminate the Church's influence upon social life; the Communists generally closed the local church upon the collectivization of a village.⁹¹ This dramatically decreased the influence that the Church could have in an individual's life by standardizing the peasants' social experience and education. Hindus argued that, "On the [collective farm] the increased propaganda through everyday conversation, motion pictures, lectures, the constant emphasis that it is not God but the machine, not a supernatural power but science and nature that determine the productivity of the land, shatters the [peasant's] mechanistic faith."⁹² Collectivization was not a mere reorganization of land ownership, but rather a complete destruction and rebuilding of the peasants' social structure. For centuries, the peasants had lived on and worked their own land, but this new social structure imposed from above dramatically changed peasant culture, particularly religion.

But what effect did all of these educational and propaganda efforts have on the individual Russian peasant? An important source that tells of the effect of reforms, specifically collectivization, on the Russian peasantry, is the previously mentioned *Red Bread* by Maurice Hindus. As a former Russian peasant, he described the mental toll that collectivization imposed upon the peasantry as seen on his visit to Russia in 1929. On many occasions, he directly referred to the decline of religion in everyday life. When visiting the village church during services, Hindus noticed the lack of young adults and counted only nine people present in total.⁹³ The church building itself was in as poor of shape as its congregation: "It had obviously had no

⁹¹ Ibid., 111.

⁹² Hindus, *Red Bread*, 367-68.

⁹³ Ibid., 42.

repairs for years. The ceiling was flecked with dry rain-spots; plaster was crumbling from the walls; the floor was in places rotted through in great holes like evil eyes gaping out of the dark ground below; panes in two of the windows were broken, and the frame of one was falling apart”.⁹⁴ Though, as mentioned earlier, churches were commonly destroyed or converted into non-religious facilities throughout this period, this suggests that many also fell into disrepair as a result of infrequent usage.

Village morality was also waning according to the accounts of Hindus. One woman, who showed concern over the falling morality of her peers, said, “Women were growing worldly—some of them were even talking of going to the hospital in the city for abortions. They did not want to have many children any more.”⁹⁵ Yet the young adults showed almost no concern for this fall in morality, instead fantasizing about improved technology and sexual freedom.⁹⁶ Wedding ceremonies themselves had traditionally been religious in peasant Russia, but a new distinction among weddings developed as the Bolsheviks attempted to eliminate religious displays. The white wedding was a traditional religious wedding, whereas a red wedding eschewed the religious ceremony in favor of a secular wedding. Hindus noted that, in one town while he was there, three of the four weddings that occurred were red weddings.⁹⁷ Though four weddings hardly constitute a representative sample, this shows that at least some willingly chose to abandon longstanding tradition.

As one source, however, Hindus cannot definitively describe the effect of Soviet policy upon the peasantry. *Red Bread* contains only one account, and many of the people interviewed were adults saddened by the supposed downfall of society and of morality. Husband notes that,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 192.

with early Bolshevik antireligious efforts, the younger and older generations were split in regards to their opinions.⁹⁸ Throughout *Red Bread*, the younger generation proved to be more accepting of change, and perhaps more susceptible to communist ideology and propaganda. For example, a boy of twelve told Hindus that, if he were given an automobile, he would give it to the collective farm to which his father belongs.⁹⁹ Though the youths were not naïve, they tended to be more idealistic. Disenchanted with the state of affairs to which their parents belonged, they were ready to take extreme measures to change the world. This is not to say that Soviet ideology and propaganda had little to no effect on them; it merely gave them a structured ideology, through which they could attempt to invoke change. This suggests little in terms of efficacy of Soviet methods, instead highlighting a generational gap in opinion present in all societies.

But other evidence remains to describe a general indifference to Soviet policy. Though many converted to atheism from their previous Christian beliefs, many more merely camouflaged their Christianity, hiding it as much as possible in order to escape the wrath of Soviet government. The peasantry loathed giving up certain customs, such as infant baptism, and others had great significance in the peasant's social life. As a result, they retained many of these beliefs and customs, though Soviet persecution made it difficult to be blatantly religious. Being forced to place religion in the backgrounds of their lives, these Russians would have been less likely to actively display it or teach it to their children. This would ultimately contribute to a decline in religiosity among later generations.

With the widespread collectivization, industrialization, and urbanization of Russian society, the rural peoples of Russia became rapidly exposed to new ideologies. Without this general modernization, these new ideologies would have been deflected by centuries of tradition.

⁹⁸ Husband, *Godless Communists*, 59.

⁹⁹ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 136.

By forcing the Russian to abandon traditions and inundate them with propaganda, the Bolsheviks hoped to inspire doubt that would transform into atheism. Though the new Soviet Russia of 1932 cannot be accurately called atheist, the breakdown of longstanding traditions resulted in a less religious society than had existed on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, fifteen years earlier.

Conclusion

In the years following the First Five-Year Plan, Russia finally came close to achieving universal childhood education and universal literacy, two goals which the Bolsheviks had aimed to achieve since taking power. Though these landmarks in education helped to spark a decline in Russian religiosity, the spread of atheism was nowhere near as effective as the spread of literacy and primary education. Nevertheless, significant progress was made.

The 1937 Soviet census gives some indirect measure of the spread of atheism. Though, especially in the era of Stalin's purges, people would have been generally reluctant to admit to practicing religion, some data exists to suggest the magnitude of religion's decline. Of the churches still open on the eve of collectivization, over half had shut down by the 1937 census.¹⁰⁰ Between 1926 and 1937, the number of clergymen throughout the country more than halved, declining from 79,000 to 31,000.¹⁰¹ Though this does not necessarily suggest that individual belief declined, it would have had a definite effect on many, particularly the young who had not been socialized in the Church. These people would have become adults in the late 1920's and 1930's, years following the Russian Orthodox Church's fall from prominence in Russian life. By becoming literate at an early age and receiving a secular, science-based education, they would have little reason to believe in the basic tenets of their parents' religion. As a result of this, a new generation was coming into adulthood on the eve of World War II, a generation that, though not predominantly atheist, was significantly less religious than any previous generation.

This limited yet important success can be traced in part to Bolshevik efforts in spreading literacy, guaranteeing education for everyone, and attempting to replace a formerly religious culture with a new communist culture. With the drive for universal literacy, the Bolsheviks

¹⁰⁰ Husband, *Godless Communists*, 160.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 160.

began with heavy rhetoric but little action. Decree after decree mandated that the literate people throughout Russia should come to the aid of the illiterate in order to achieve universal literacy. The burden of achieving universal literacy was placed almost entirely upon the local governments and the individual. The Soviet societies that formed throughout the 1920's did little to genuinely help with the spread of literacy. As a result, literacy rates scarcely increased throughout the N.E.P., which led to the inability of most people to absorb antireligious teachings.

The Soviet administration likewise placed the burden of educating the nation's children upon the shoulders of the local governments. Decrees mandated that religious instruction be abandoned within schools and that every child should receive a secular education, but this did not occur throughout the first decade of Bolshevik rule. Particularly among the peasantry, parents needed their children to help work the land, which resulted in absenteeism during certain times of the year. Religious holidays also reduced the number of days that the average child would attend school. Since most teachers were trained under tsarist rule and new teachers were dissuaded from beginning in the profession because of poor pay, religious teaching continued and the communist curriculum did not receive widespread support among teachers throughout the years of the N.E.P.

Though a massive propaganda campaign to eliminate religion from Russian culture began soon after the Bolshevik Revolution, its success was largely contingent upon the successes of the drives for universal literacy and universal childhood education. Coercive measures, such as the destruction of churches and the execution of clergymen, may have helped to destroy the Russian Orthodox Church, but they did little to eliminate the religious beliefs of the individual.

In each of these areas, the Bolsheviks began with little success. Eventually, however, a massive societal transformation guaranteed the success of these endeavors. The drive to

collectivize agriculture led to the virtual abolishment of private land ownership, resulting in large groups of people living together on collective farms. This would simplify propagandizing the peasants, since the collectives ideally provided for themselves, which in turn provided income to hire teachers and offer courses necessary for antireligious education. Industrialization required that people move to the cities in order to participate in the building of a new communist society that could economically compete with foreign capitalist powers. This led to rapid urbanization, as large numbers of peasants moved to the cities to find work. After moving to the city, the new residents were forced to acquire literacy, both for basic survival and for success at their new jobs. Collectivization, industrialization, and urbanization together simplified the process of educating the Russian people, which would make them significantly more receptive to antireligious ideology. In addition to these things, coercion became more prevalent as Stalin solidified his position in the government. By the 1930's, those who opposed the Soviet government could be shipped off to labor camps for their disloyalty.

In the long term, Soviet antireligious work succeeded only partially. Even decades after World War II, despite the cultural transformation, the Communist Party could never entirely eliminate the influence of religion from Russia. Though surveys taken during communist rule are of questionable legitimacy, more recent polls have been taken to determine the religiosity of the people in post-Soviet Russia. In 1999, 70.3 percent of respondents believed in God, and 44.7% considered religion to be important.¹⁰² This suggests that, despite over seventy years under an atheist regime, most Russians had not been transformed into atheists. Though not necessarily the God of the Russian Orthodox Church, most believed in some sort of God.

¹⁰² The Association of Religion Data Archives, "Russia," Accessed 5/9/2008, http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_186_5.asp

Belief in God, however, is not the best measure of Soviet success in this area. Despite the high percentage of believers, only 9.3% of respondents said that they attended religious services once a month or more.¹⁰³ Perhaps most importantly of the data, in 1995, only 20.4 percent of respondents said that they had a religious upbringing.¹⁰⁴ This suggests that, though the Communist Party may not have been able to entirely eliminate belief in God and guarantee that every individual was an atheist, they made huge strides to guarantee that religion had a subdued role in Russian life. Few were raised in a religious household, and even fewer attend church services on a regular basis. With universal secular education, finally attained in the 1930's, the Soviets were finally able to undermine religious instruction received in the Church or at home. As a result, the importance of religion in Russian life was diluted with each passing generation.

The question remains: did the Bolsheviks, upon rising to power in 1917, ultimately accomplish their goal of eliminating religion throughout Russia? If measured in terms of creating a communist state composed entirely of atheists, they certainly failed. But perhaps this is not a realistic indicator. Through decades of educational reform, widespread propaganda efforts, and massive societal transformation, the Bolsheviks pushed religion into the background of Russian life. And despite widespread belief in God, religion largely remains in the background of Russian life today. Because of this, despite years of struggle upon first coming to power, the Bolshevik campaign against religion proved to be a long-term success.

¹⁰³ The Association of Religion Data Archives, "Russia."

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Appendix A



Figure A1



Figure A2

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